PART I

Non-Intervention

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CHAPTER 5

Conspiracy Theories, Spontaneous Orders, and Global Politics

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Introduction

Conspiracy theories greatly influence society, in both overt and subtle ways, and on both the macro-level of social and political trends and on the micro-level of individual psychology and belief-formation. Whether you're bullish or bearish on conspiracy theories, they warrant careful analysis. In this essay, I explore what conspiracy theories are, why relegating them to merely "fringe" views is mistaken, and how four analytic tendencies drive common conspiracy theorist errors. I also put conspiracy theories in dialogue with the concept of spontaneous order to develop a novel social scientific methodological framework incorporating elements from each, a "convergence-conspiracy continuum." Finally, I consider conspiracy theories and spontaneous orders in the broader context of global politics, the connections between conspiracy theories and anti-semitism, and the effects of conspiracy theories on power in society. By

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the end of this essay, I hope it is clear how exploring the nature and function of conspiracy theories can illuminate many enduring issues across epistemology, social science, and institutional analysis.

Conspiracy Theories

"Conspiracy theory" notoriously lacks a clear definition and there exists no consensus even amongst those striving for one.[1] "Conspiring," of course, refers to people acting in concert for secret and nefarious aims, which is a part of life, but "conspiracy theory" has taken on a more specific meaning over time, which seems related to ordinary "conspiring" but also suggestive of something greater. The term "conspiracy theory" seems to have first been used in late nineteenth-century media reports of police investigations into local criminal plots.[2] The phenomenon itself goes back much further in human history, to ancient Athenian political scandals and continuing on through the Middle Ages.[3] It wasn't until the Enlightenment, however, with its great social upheavals and burgeoning secret societies, that the "foundations of modern conspiracism" were laid and the "petty plots of the eighteenth century and earlier could now blossom into an all-consuming political vision."[4] The totalizing model arguably climaxed in the 1903 fabrication "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," which cast different institutions and social ills as tentacles extending from a singular plot of Jewish world domination. Philosopher Karl Popper termed this kind of analysis the "conspiracy theory of society" or the "view that an explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon (sometimes it is a hidden interest which has first to be revealed), and who have planned and conspired to bring it about."[5]

[1] Juha Räikkä and Juho Ritola. "Philosophy and Conspiracy Theories." *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* ed. Michael Butter and Peter Knight (NY: Routledge 2020) 57.

[2] McKenzie-McHarg, Andrew. "How Did Conspiracy Theories Come to Be Seen as Theories?" Paper presented at the York Cultural History Conference, University of York.

[3] Brotherton, Rob. *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories* (UK: Bloomsbury Publishing 2015) 19–26.

[4] Brotheron, *Suspicious Minds* 30.

[5] Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (US: First Princeton Paperback Printing 1971) 94.

It's tempting to think of "conspiracy theory" as solely the domain of specific explanatory stories that may or may not turn out to be true. Were the 9/11 terror attacks an "inside job"? Do vaccines contain microchips? Are famous celebrities actually reptilian aliens? These are paradigmatic cases of "conspiracy theories," but Popper's taxonomy counsels us to think more generally, about not just conspiracy *theories* but conspiracy *theory* (compare political or scientific *theories* to political or scientific *theory*). On this view, "conspiracy theory" is not a list of potentially true explanations, but a certain kind of methodological framework; a lens through which to view society, social order, and how social order comes to be and operates. There are specific conspiracy theories, some of which will turn out to be true and some of which will turn out to be false, and there is conspiracy theory, a more fundamental way of interpreting and making sense of events in the social world.

But isn't it both intuitive and obvious that at least some events can be explained by way of conspiracy, i.e. the discovery of parties who, in pursuing their interests, plan to bring the events about? Making sense of the world, especially the actions of others, in terms of human intention is both quite natural and reliable. When I see my friend Joey assemble all the ingredients of a peanut butter sandwich, spread the peanut butter across the bread slices, smush them together, and then chow down, I almost automatically interpret all her bodily movements as part of a unified plan to make and eat a peanut butter sandwich because she perceives eating a peanut butter sandwich to be in her interest. There's nothing mysterious or strange about my interpretation of Joey's actions here. In fact, it would only be mysterious or strange if I *didn't* think Joey's actions reflected a unified plan on her behalf and instead I posited some other kind of explanation for the events I witnessed.

This broader, methodological conception of "conspiracy theory" is explicitly recognized and embraced by many conspiracy theorists themselves. Indeed, economist Murray Rothbard saw conspiracy theory as a basic outgrowth and natural application of praxeological theory, or the study of human action (not just narrowly conceived "economic" action, but all action) in terms of human purposes and intentions.

> Far from being a paranoid or a determinist, the conspiracy analyst is a *praxeologist*; that is, he believes that people act purposively, that they make conscious choices to employ means in order to arrive at goals. Hence, if a steel tariff is passed, he assumes that the steel industry lobbied for it;

> if a public works project is created, he hypothesizes that it was promoted by an alliance of construction firms and unions who enjoyed public works contracts, and bureaucrats who expanded their jobs and incomes.[6]

On this point, Rothbard was echoing an argument raised much earlier, by economist Adam Smith, who warned that "People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the publick, or in some contrivance to raise prices."[7] The existence, and potential usefulness, of "conspiracy theory" in the sense of a certain methodological framework helps explain both why people who engage in conspiracy theory are not necessarily committed to any particular conspiracy theories and why people who engage in conspiracy theory nevertheless often converge on many similar conspiracy theories united by various analytic tendencies. Let's first discuss the former and then return to the latter.

There's no litmus test of particular conspiracy theories that a conspiracy theorist must subscribe to in order to count as engaging in conspiracy theory. Some conspiracy theorists are happy to indulge in stories of UFO sightings while scoffing at the absurdity of flat-earthers. Others are busy mapping out the apparent connections between the Freemasons, Stanley Kubrick, and Israel's Mossad while looking down upon Bigfoot enthusiasts as hopelessly naive. Even those who subscribe to standard and widely accepted explanatory stories are engaging in conspiracy theory in this more purely methodological sense. Whether you think the Holocaust was real or fake, your explanatory story is going to crucially depend upon human purpose and intention. Not appreciating the role of formal conspiracy in either widely accepted explanatory stories or explanatory stories that are initially fringe, but come to be widely accepted, risks reducing and distorting "conspiracy theory" to, first, "implausible conspiracy theory," then to "implausible theory, whether or not it involves a conspiracy," and, finally, to merely "fringe beliefs."[8]

[6] Rothbard, Murray. "Viewpoint: The Conspiracy Theory of History Revisited," *Reason Magazine* (April 1977).

[7] Smith, Adam. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1979 [1776]) 145.

[8] Walker, Jesse. "When Is a Conspiracy Theory a Conspiracy?" *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 12.7 (2023): 20–22.

Why should we avoid using "conspiracy theory" as synonymous with "fringe theory," even when so many self-identified conspiracy theorists seem to make that very conflation core to their own attraction to, and understanding of, conspiracy theory? There are three reasons. Let's start with the most obvious. A theory's popularity or lack thereof has no inherent bearing on whether the explanatory stories offered by such a theory are worth believing or not. The Earth being round has not always been as widely accepted as it is nowadays, but it was never any less true. The paradigmatic "conspiracy theories that turned out to be true," such as the CIA's illegal human experimentation through Project MKUltra or the FBI's illegal spying, surveillance, and disruption through COINTELPRO, were likewise not always widely accepted to be true, even though they were.

The second reason not to conflate "conspiracy theory" with "fringe theory" is that what was once fringe doesn't always remain so and perhaps never even was. Journalist Jesse Walker showed conspiracy theories have been far from merely fringe beliefs throughout United States history, but instead potent, recurring, and often completely mainstream beliefs.[9] Indeed, many people mistakenly, and often self-servingly, relegate conspiracy theory to their perceived out-group, to another political persuasion or class background or psychological makeup, when conspiracy theory is in fact a mass phenomenon that doesn't neatly track any demographic lines.[10]

Overrating the fringeness of certain beliefs can disguise them as impotent, invisible, and irrelevant when they are anything but. Whether a theory is ridiculous and dangerous, reasonable and benevolent, or somewhere in between, perceived "fringeness" will lead some people to be drawn to the theory out of contrarianism, skepticism, and lack of social trust, while other people will be less likely to encounter, reflect upon, and familiarize themselves with perspectives for and against it.

The third reason not to conflate "conspiracy theory" with "fringe theory" is a matter of self-awareness and epistemic responsibility. If someone thinks of conspiracy theorists as just "those people over there" wearing tinfoil hats, then they might not see themselves as engaging in conspiracy theory until they don their own tinfoil hat, with anything short

[9] Walker, Jesse. *The United States of Paranoia* (NY: HarperCollins 2013).

[10] Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds* 10.

of that bold fashion choice qualitatively different than what "those people over there" are doing. Conspiracy theorists often tell others to follow the white rabbit down the rabbit hole as far as it goes, or take the red pill and ditch the blue pill, or whatever other literary or cinematic metaphor they choose to use. But what if I can't even see the rabbit hole or tell apart the red and blue pills? I'll have no idea if my reasoning has led me down the rabbit hole if I just keep envisioning myself standing atop solid, stable ground. I'll have no idea if I've taken the red pill if I just fancy myself immune to its medicinal effects. With enough epistemic blinders on, I could very well become a conspiracy theorist without realizing it. This blindness is epistemically impoverishing, whether or not the conspiracy theories I've found myself drawn to are reasonable. If they are reasonable, I can't see the usefulness of the methodology I've used to get there and apply it elsewhere, and if they aren't reasonable, I've unwittingly led myself down the path of unreasonability and have no reliable method for avoiding that path elsewhere.

Conspiracy theorists come from all walks of life and are not all committed to the same sets of beliefs that the rest of us can just label "conspiracy theories" and therefore ignore. Sometimes, the conspiracy theories are coming from inside the house, and it turns out we are the conspiracy theorist donning a tinfoil hat only visible to others. But I suspect some readers will be quite unsatisfied with my discussion of conspiracy theory thus far. Many of you are probably saying, "Yes, there is great diversity and variety, not only amongst conspiracy theorists, from their age to their gender to their education and more, but also amongst conspiracy theories themselves, with no definitive consensus concerning them, and yes, I must be careful in my attitude toward conspiracy theory lest I unwittingly engage in it, but how do you explain the nevertheless extensive convergence of both theorists and theories on beliefs that are rightly considered unreasonable by the rest of us? Sure, we shouldn't conveniently reduce the term to encompass only those explanatory stories I feel I can prima facie dismiss, but shouldn't we also resist expanding the term so far as to include anyone who can see Joey just wanted to eat a peanut butter sandwich, or to equally include both Holocaust deniers *and* Holocaust believers?".

Indeed, in trying to identify, on the one hand, the seed from which conspiracy theorizing is born and, on the other hand, the utmost widest number of cases the term could conceivably cover, we run the risk of counting everyone a conspiracy theorist and every explanatory story a

conspiracy theory, thus emptying "conspiracy theory" of all possible meaning or applicability. Attempting to avoid the pitfalls of certain terms' ordinary usage can end up isolating us in a world of our own private meaning, and attempting to escape the world of our own private meaning can leave us prone to the pitfalls of certain terms' ordinary usage. All we're really left with is a delicate balancing act, a continuing challenge to resist slavishness to either others' usage or our own.

Conspiracy theory in the broadest, most fundamental sense is about explaining events by reference to human purposes and intentions, but there exists more specific, more concentrated, and more intense applications of this methodology which the term can often and usefully be reserved for. It is here that we return to why there is such convergence amongst conspiracy theorists and theories, or convergence in the way conspiracy theory gets employed beyond the trivial cases of either ordinary human action (e.g. eating peanut butter sandwiches) or reasonably certain explanatory stories (e.g. the Holocaust happened). There are four analytic tendencies which are characteristic of "conspiracy theory" in the more popular usage of the term and which help explain the significant convergence in people's application of conspiracy theory in the sense of a methodological orientation. These tendencies can help us bridge "conspiracy theory" in terms of merely explaining events via human purposes and the often unreasonable "conspiracy theories" labeled as such across wider discourse.

The first analytic tendency is our often hungry and overactive pattern-recognition capacity rooted in prehistoric evolutionary selection effects. Survival and efficacy in the world crucially depends upon our ability to recognize patterns that may threaten our lives and projects if gone unnoticed. Philosopher Joseph Heath saw a critical link between this more basic evolved capacity and the phenomenon of modern humans seeing conspiracies where there are in fact none.

> Thinking that there is something in the bushes, when in fact there is nothing, may cause one an unnecessary startle reaction. Thinking that there is nothing in the bushes, when in fact there is something, can bring about one's premature demise. As a result, our pattern-recognition systems tend to have high sensitivity, which means that we are far more likely to see patterns where there are none than we are to ignore patterns that are actually there. This in turn leads us to see spurious correlations in the flow

> of experience, and thus to posit causal connections between events that are in fact independent of one another.[11]

We don't always see, or more accurately, impose, just any old pattern either. We often impose patterns specifically of agency and anthropomorphization.[12] That is, we often over-perceive agency and ascribe human intention to non-human phenomena such as the environment. It's not too surprising, given the centrality of human purpose to our lives, that we sometimes see it where there is none. So not only do we sometimes make sense of seemingly related but actually unrelated events by imposing a pattern onto them, we go further and interpret that pattern as one of human intention and as springing from (something like) a human mind. Of course, actual conspiracies *are* patterns of human intention and spring from a human mind, but all too often we wind up imposing conspiracy onto mere coincidence.

Coincidentally connected dates, names, symbols, etc. play a large role in much conspiracy theorizing, leading many people to find themselves feeling sure of some sort of relevant connections they've identified, but unable to articulate any actual causal mechanism uniting them. Consider the two most famous United States Presidential assassinations: Abraham Lincoln and John Kennedy. Separated by just short of a century, but united by, first, unexpected tragedy and, second, an unexpectedly long list of coincidences, the assassinations of Lincoln and Kennedy have been the subject of many wide-ranging conspiracy theories attempting to connect the two figures. Here are some of the coincidences: Both have seven letter last names. Both were elected to congress in '46 and to the presidency in '60. Both were married in their 30s to a woman in their 20s. Both were shot in the head on a Friday. Both of their successors were Southerners born in '08, had six letter first names, and had the last name Johnson. All of the above is both true and incredibly weird. But inferring from all this weirdness that there must be a conspiracy afoot is classic overactive pattern-and-agency-recognition.

Unchecked pattern-recognition unfortunately suffers from somewhat limited internal-correction mechanisms, because even "testing" an

[11] Heath, Joseph. "When does Critical Theory Become Conspiracy Theory?" 9.

[12] Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Olivier Klein and Jasna Miloševic Đordevicz. "Social-Cognitive Processes Underlying Belief in Conspiracy Theories." *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* ed. Michael Butter and Peter Knight (NY: Routledge 2020) 172.

apparent pattern often just looks like seeking out new instances of that very pattern. This can dovetail with confirmation bias to create an epistemicdownward spiral, with ever more "evidence" of the pattern appearing everywhere, apparently vindicating even the most clearly coincidentally-driven conspiracy theories. As one goes further down this spiral, the whole process becomes harder and harder to correct, or even recognize for what it is.

> It is not difficult to see how the combination of apophenia ["the tendency of the human mind to see patterns or connections in random or meaningless data"[13]] and confirmation bias can be a source of epistemic peril. We have a hyperactive pattern-recognition system, functioning at a sub-intentional level, which leads us to experience flashes of insight, in which we suddenly "see the pattern," "connect the dots," or "follow the bread-crumbs" in the world around us. Unfortunately, this system (or set of systems) is biased in the direction of over-detecting meaningful patterns in what often amounts to just random input or unconnected events. Thus, like any high-sensitivity test, its results must be subjected to a high-selectivity test in order to improve accuracy. Unfortunately, the procedure that we employ in order to evaluate a perceived pattern is just to look for more instances of the pattern.[14]

The most straightforward way to end this kind of epistemic down spiral is by simply putting the brakes on one's pattern-recognition capacity, stepping back from all the apparently patterned events, trying to look at them from a different vantage point, and finally accepting coincidentally-related events for what they are: not united by any pattern, and certainly not explicable through a conspiracy theory, but simply independent events unrelated to each other except through the arbitrary and irrelevant similarities or parallels we can't help but notice.

But short of accepting this null hypothesis, and maybe on the way there, wouldn't the arisal of facts straightforwardly inconsistent with the perceived pattern also help put the brakes on an overactive pattern-recognition capacity? You might think so, and sometimes you'd be right, but our pattern-recognition capacities are surprisingly good at incorporating even obviously inconsistent facts into an even broader pattern. After

[13] Heath, "When does Critical Theory Become Conspiracy Theory?" 7.

[14] 12.

all, if my primary way of making sense of events in the social world is by reference to human purposes and intentions, then even (or maybe especially) facts that seem superficially inconsistent with a more local pattern I've recognized could also be explained as part of an even wider purpose or set of purposes at work. My new explanation would be more ambitious, but it would also be more explanatory, bringing together the original pattern I've recognized as well as these new, only seemingly inconsistent, facts, all while keeping purpose and intention at the forefront of my explanatory story. This kind of analytic move looks incredibly appealing from within conspiracy theory since it's the only way to keep making sense of new, inconsistent facts from the inside of that basic model of the world.

This brings us to the second analytic tendency that helps explain the significant convergence in people's application of conspiracy theory, which Heath called "epistemic isolation" and through which "features of the theory serve to immunize it from contrary evidence, and thus from falsification."[15] Such isolation and immunization ought to set off some serious epistemic alarm bells, but they're also a more or less natural application of the methodological tools available to conspiracy theory because it strives to explain further data in terms of human purposes and intentions. This is why things like planted evidence, false flag operations, crisis actors, and various other kinds of decoys, distractions, and diversions play such a large role in the explanations offered by conspiracy theory. From within conspiracy theory, these sorts of phenomena are to be expected. Indeed, it would be weird if they didn't occur.

"Epistemic isolation" masquerades as a great strength of conspiracy theory, because of its more impenetrable explanatory posture, but it is in fact one of its most glaring weaknesses, because of its inability to see counter-examples as genuinely counter. As philosopher Brian Keeley put it, "Conspiracy theories *always* explain more than competing theories, because by invoking a conspiracy, they can explain *both* the data of the received account *and* the errant data that the received theory fails to explain."[16] It seems as though "… conspiracy theories are the only theories for which evidence *against* them is actually construed as evidence *in*

[15] 15.

[16] Keeley, Brian. "Of Conspiracy Theories." *Journal of Philosophy* 96.3 (1999): 109–126.

favor of them."[17] Closely related is conspiracy theory's built-in and potentially unassailable "error account," which refers to how "… the theory itself generates the prediction that most people will reject the theory."[18] Whether faced with errant data or dissenting interlocutors, conspiracy theory offers a form of explanation without engagement, an explanatory story that doesn't need to address such data or interlocutors on their own terms, but is instead able to go beyond them and thereby assimilate them into a larger and larger conspiracy theory.

What everyone else might sensibly interpret as an obvious counterexample to some hypothesized conspiracy, the conspiracy theorist interprets as further evidence of, at least, that conspiracy, if not also as evidence of an even grander, more all-encompassing conspiracy that includes the original conspiracy and then some. New and/or novel events no longer have to be meaningfully connected to the prior events in a pattern except along a single dimension: they are part of the same overarching conspiracy. When all you have is conspiracy theory, everything starts to look like a conspiracy.

Even granting conspiracy theorists' widespread presupposition that their conspiracy theories are the target of false falsification in the form of planted evidence, false flag operations, crisis actors, and the like (it's certainly plausible that at least some of those things can and do exist), the escalating labyrinth of narratives needed to make sense of both the apparently patterned data and the errant data winds up cannibalizing itself.

> … [A]s a conspiracy theory matures, attempt after attempt to falsify a conspiracy theory appears to succeed, and this apparent success must be explained as the nefarious work of the conspirators. As a result of this process, an initial claim that a small group of people are conspiring gives way to claims of larger and larger conspiracies.[19]

This is the third tendency that helps explain the significant convergence in people's application of conspiracy theory: the way conspiracy theories seem to naturally balloon further and further in order to protect the internal coherency of their inflated explanations. Every piece of planted

[17] Keeley, "Of Conspiracy Theories.".

[18] 15.

[19] Keeley, "Of Conspiracy Theories.".

evidence, every false flag operation, and every crisis actor necessitates a larger and larger explanatory story and more and more people who are in on the conspiracy. The more apparent-but-actually-misleading counter-examples a conspiracy theory faces, the more opportunities it is given to absorb them into itself, to expand the conspiracy to involve more events, more individuals, and more institutions. One's "conspiracy net" expands wider and wider to eventually include one's political leaders, corporate bosses, news anchors, teachers, coworkers, acquaintances, neighbors, friends, and even family. Epistemic corrosion and social corrosion go hand in hand, feeding each other until the foundations of even one's most cherished beliefs have all but disappeared into a sea of deceptive and nefarious conspirators.

Even beyond falsifying any of the particular elements of a broader explanatory story offered by conspiracy theory, the theories face this more basic problem because of the "increasing amount of skepticism required to maintain faith in a conspiracy theory as time passes and the conspiracy is not uncovered in a convincing fashion."[20] Thus, the more familiar epistemic problems of skepticism start to rear their ugly heads. Skepticism of specific claims, or concerning specific events, individuals, or institutions, is sometimes perfectly reasonable and can be usefully examined in its own right, whether that skepticism turns out to be warranted, unwarranted, or a bit of both. But "as this skepticism grows to include more and more people and institutions, the less plausible any conspiracy becomes"[21] because the level of skepticism involved eventually reaches a qualitatively different level and starts to become self-undermining. Skepticism of specific claims isn't like skepticism writ large. The former still retains some epistemic footing on which to stand and evaluate itself, while the latter kicks the chair out from underneath itself and continues professing claims as if they could be evaluated without the footing originally holding itself up.

> In the process of holding onto a belief in an increasingly massive conspiracy behind more and more public events, we undermine the grounds for believing in anything. At some point, we will be forced to recognize the

[20] Keeley, "Of Conspiracy Theories.".

[21] Keeley, "Of Conspiracy Theories.".

> unwarranted nature of the conspiracy theory if we are to be left with *any* warranted explanations and beliefs at all.[22]

In chipping away at the foundations of our knowledge and the processes by which warranted beliefs are even generated, conspiracy theory quickly starts to replicate the errors of epistemic skepticism. Indeed, "to the extent that a conspiracy theory relies on a global and far-reaching doubt of the motives and good will of others, it is akin to global philosophical skepticism."[23] The epistemic skeptic counsels us to distrust our minds while invariably relying on their own, to disbelieve knowledge of everything other than skepticism, to be suspicious of truth claims other than the truth claims made by the skeptic. The conspiracy theorist counsels us to distrust social institutions while invariably relying on them, to disbelieve the testimony of everyone other than themselves, to be suspicious of explanatory stories other than the explanatory stories offered by the conspiracy theorist. However noble a conspiracy theorist's efforts to find the truth, the tools they employ can wind up destroying its very possibility. Author Robert Anton Wilson summed up the fundamentally self-destructive character of conspiracy theories and the basic predicament facing the conspiracy theorist who tries to apply their methodology consistently.

> …[A] conspiracy that can deceive us about 6,000,000 deaths can deceive us about *anything*, and that it takes a great leap of faith for Holocaust Revisionists to believe World War II happened at all, or that Franklin Roosevelt did serve as President from 1933 to 1945, or that Marilyn Monroe was more 'real' than King Kong or Donald Duck.[24]If the institutions of science, journalism, government, business, technology, religion, media, education, and so on are all corrupted in some form of another, and they are at varying levels and to varying degrees hiding truths and planting falsehoods, then any sort of epistemic warrant for the vast majority of our beliefs has completely dissipated. Conspiracy theory's exemplary "free thinker" is a misnomer: they may be "free," but only from the knowledge discovered, developed, and disseminated by social institutions, thereby limiting their "thinking" since so much of our

[22] Keeley, "Of Conspiracy Theories.".

[23] Keeley, "Of Conspiracy Theories.".

[24] Wilson, Robert Anton. "Beyond True and False: A Sneaky Quiz With a Subversive Commentary," *The Fringes of Reason* ed. Ted Schultz (NY: Harmony Books 1989) 172.

thought depends crucially upon the epistemic scaffolding provided by the testimony of countless others via these very institutions.

It's no surprise that conspiracy theorists are found to use more social information than they report,[25] in part because it's impossible to really function in society while retaining the image of the independent, critical, and free thinker that conspiracy theorists so wish to embody. But this lack of self-awareness can be epistemically debilitating, since conspiracy theorists won't be as able to identify, parse, or evaluate the kinds of social information they, however implicitly or unconsciously, rely upon, making them ironically more susceptible to various forms of social influence. In this way, conspiracy theory can encourage a vain and hubristic attempt to gain an impossibly synoptic view of society, of social institutions, and of the very complex social processes atop which the vast majority of our knowledge rests.

We've now arrived at the fourth analytic tendency that helps explain the significant convergence in people's application of conspiracy theory, although it could perhaps be understood as the more fundamental tendency encompassing each of the previous three. This is the tendency to engage in constructivism, which "can be seen as a social expression of the human need for psychological efficacy," "deifies the human ability to know," "embraces a concept of reason that transcends human epistemic strictures," and "requires people to step outside the socio-historical process in order to comprehend and control it."[26] We must always keep in mind that we are only "partially knowing social actors, whose efficacious use of *human* reason cannot be abstracted from the concrete specificity of context."[27]

The temptations of constructivism pervade all forms of inquiry and are rooted in the basic, and old, human need for efficacy and intelligibility. Striving to successfully interact with one's environment, carry out definite means toward definite ends, and trace a narrative line through our activities past, present, and future, all intuitively underlie the basic human condition. But human beings are neither invincible nor immortal,

[25] Sacha Altay, Kenzo Nera, Waqas Ejaz, Céline Schöpfer, and Frédéric Tomas. "Conspiracy believers claim to be free thinkers but (Under)Use advice like everyone else." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 62.4 (2023): 1782–1797.

[26] Sciabarra, Matthew Chris. *Marx, Hayek, and Utopia* (NY: State University of New York Press 1995) 42–3.

[27] Sciabarra, *Marx, Hayek, and Utopia* 51.

neither omniscient nor omnipresent. Our knowledge is necessarily finite and limited. Sometimes we unsuccessfully interact with our environment. Sometimes our means and ends are uncertain and unaligned. Sometimes our past, present, and future are connected merely chronologically and not via any humanly sensible narrative throughline. So much human activity, from religion to art to philosophy to science, has been in some way or another interested in addressing, and hopefully filling in or otherwise reconciling ourselves to, the gap between this basic human need for ineligibility and the unavoidable unintelligibility of much of our experiences. Theorist Butler Shaffer located the origins of constructivism in this very yearning.

> The critical factor motivating the imposition of structure would appear to stem from a basic need that men have to make the world about them predictable and subject. The maintenance of 'orderly' social relationships is an adjunct of a man's basic metaphysical need for an environment providing a consistent outcome for his actions.[28]

Conspiracy theory is interested in addressing this need as well. A big reason conspiracy theory's explanatory stories stressing human purpose and intention can seem so sensible, appealing, and even comforting is that they offer a way to fill in the gap created by our need for efficacy and the not-always-so-cooperative world around us. If it turns out the social world consists primarily of humans-as-conspirators, that means the social world must itself be a kind of construction, which conspirators continuously and consciously (re-)construct and guide. One's picture of the world is much clearer and more actionable from within the framework of conspiracy theory. This model of the environment in which we act speaks to that deeply-seated human need for efficacy and intelligibility.

The clarity and actionability offered by conspiracy theory can help conspiracy theorists feel better, safer, and more efficacious, but in reality, they come at the expense of genuine efficacy. Conspiracy theory, like the broader constructivist worldview from which it springs, offers only the illusion of efficacy. Examining the structure of human reason more generally, and then specifically in the context of the social affairs in

[28] Shaffer, Butler. "Violence as a Product of Imposed Order." *University of Miami Law Review* 29.4 (1975): 732–763.

which we operate, reveals the impoverishment of all forms of constructivism. Political theorist Chris Sciabarra saw both the allure and failure of constructivism as partly coming out of our inability to just carry over our ordinary reasoning processes from the natural world into the social world.

> Humans think within a definite structure. Their minds need such structure in order to think. Their sensory apparatus perceives real things and processes in the universe, while their rational faculty apprehends structural and logical interrelationships. They achieve the cognitive efficacy that is requisite to their survival, by acting in accordance with the laws of logic, to produce desired effects. All of natural science is an attempt to systematize human knowledge of consistent and predictable relationships. Science charts certain course of action initiated by particular entities with distinctive features, producing specific effects.
>
> In human affairs, however, one person's attempt to generate a desired effect is tempered by the reality of other people who are engaging in similar actions. The result is often a product that no one intended. To a constructivist rationalist, this is incompatible with the human need for predictability and certainty. The constructivist wishes to create a social laboratory in which people are made to act with the same predictability as a cup pushed off the table.[29]

In this way, we're led into what Sciabarra called the "synoptic delusion," or the belief that we're in "possession of holistic knowledge," which "involves grasping the complex interrelations of the society that are necessarily constituted by both articulate and inarticulate social practices."[30] But this supposed "transcendental view of the whole is not possible because the individual is among the elements that both constitute and are constituted by the social whole itself."[31] Of course, "an individual human being can always examine a particularized aspect of culture that gives him or her a certain perspective on the whole," however, "the individual's particularized vantage point emerges within the context of the culture, not external to it," so "we are unable to get a synoptic view as impersonal, detached social actors."[32]

[29] Sciabarra, *Marx, Hayek, and Utopia* 42–3.

[30] Sciabarra, *Marx, Hayek, and Utopia* 46.

[31] Sciabarra, *Marx, Hayek, and Utopia* 15.

[32] Sciabarra, *Marx, Hayek, and Utopia* 15–6.

It seems as though conspiracy theory is one of the modern inheritors of humans' older responses to inefficacy and unintelligibility and is importantly continuous with our other explanatory frameworks seeking to provide us with efficacy and intelligibility. While conspiracy theorists wish to see their theories as the product of dispassionate and neutral inquiry, those theories' hallmark features of overactive pattern-and-agency-recognition, anthropomorphization, immunity to falsification, ever-escalating and all-consuming explanatory stories, constructivism, and synoptic delusion all suggest various psychological and social factors at play.

> The general tendency to see the world as governed by conspiracies serves to provide alternative, simplistic explanations of events that are otherwise confusing, distressing, incomprehensible, or uncontrollable, in the same manner as religious or ideological belief systems.[33]

Situating conspiracy theory within the broader history of humans trying to achieve efficacy and intelligibility reveals how ingrained and comforting these kinds of explanatory frameworks can really be. When he coined the term "conspiracy theory of society," Popper also identified this very connection, casting conspiracy theory as another instance of the "secularization of a religious superstition."[34]

> This view of the aims of the social sciences arises, of course, from the mistaken theory that, whatever happens in society — especially happenings such as war, unemployment, poverty, shortages, which people as a rule dislike — is the result of direct design by some powerful individuals and groups… The belief in the Homeric gods whose conspiracies explain the history of the Trojan war is gone. The gods are abandoned. But their place is filled by powerful men or groups — sinister pressure groups whose wickedness is responsible for all the evils we suffer from — such as the Learned Elders of Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists, or the imperialists.[35]

[33] Anthony Lantian, Mike Wood, and Biljana Gjoneska. "Personality Traits, Cognitive Styles, and Worldviews Associated With Beliefs In Conspiracy Theories." *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* ed. Michael Butter and Peter Knight (NY: Routledge 2020) 156.

[34] Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* 95.

[35] Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* 95.

Conspiracy theories look superficially like deep and systematic truth-seeking, but are most often a kind of psychological comfort food designed to render an otherwise illogical, senseless, and chaotic world logical, sensible, and ordered. They are an entire system of meaning unto themselves, which is probably why so many conspiracy theorists see their conspiracy theorizing as so central to their sense of self, identity, and community. It feels really good when the world actually makes a bit of sense, especially when I'm part of a special group that sees the world's underlying sensibility and heroically fights the good fight against its clearly-defined enemies. It's these more cinematic or literary qualities of much conspiracy theorizing that lead some to trace many aspects of the modern conspiracy theorist's way of thinking to early twentieth century detective novels.[36] Indeed, could there be a more fulfilling sense of purpose in this world than being charged with unraveling the complex mysteries behind humanity's greatest ills and exposing those responsible?

Conspiracy theory doesn't just speak to our psychological and social needs but also to our existential needs. We want meaning. We want to feel important. We want to be able to influence the world around us. We want heroes and villains. We want mystery, intrigue, and suspense. We want a good story and we want to be one of the main characters of that story. Author Alan Moore saw very well the existential and storytelling function of conspiracy theories, and why the idea that there is actually no "man behind the curtain" strikes so many of us as just too horrifying to accept.

> The main thing that I learned about conspiracy theory is that conspiracy theorists actually believe in a conspiracy because that is more comforting. The truth of the world is that it is chaotic. The truth is, that it is not the Jewish banking conspiracy or the gray aliens or the 12-foot reptiloids from another dimension that are in control. The truth is more frightening, nobody is in control. The world is rudderless.[37]

This existential function of conspiracy theory is generally underrated, but must be better understood and appreciated by the rest of us if we are to provide a compelling alternative for conspiracy theorists. Disproving

[36] Boltanski, Luc. *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels, and the Making of Modern Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2014).

[37] Vylenz DeZ, dir. 2003. *The Mindscape of Alan Moore* (US: Shadowsnake Films).

specific conspiracy theories, or even showing the more general flaws in many of conspiracy theory's analytic tendencies, is unfortunately not enough in the case of individuals for whom conspiracy theory plays a much more deep-seated and meaning-generating, or even spiritual, role in their lives. Few people would choose accuracy or fidelity at the cost of meaning. This is perhaps the most difficult problem facing those interested in dispelling conspiracy theories. Trying to displace the sources of meaning in someone's life without offering them an even remotely similar source of meaning is simply a fool's errand. It's fitting to close this section with Keeley's insightful, charitable, and humble call for existential alternatives to conspiracy theory.

> Conspiracy theorists are, I submit, some of the last believers in an ordered universe. By supposing that current events are under the control of nefarious agents, conspiracy theories entail that such events are capable of being controlled. In an earlier time, it would have been natural to believe in an ordered world, in which God and other supernatural agents exercised significant influence and control… As Hegel puts it… "world history has… been rational in its course." Therefore, on this view, there is some hope that humans can understand, predict, and conceivably control the course of human events. This the conspiracy theorists believe, only they further believe that the wrong folks are at the helm. …
>
> However, the rejection of the conspiratorial worldview is not something about which I am particularly thrilled. If conspiracy theories are genuinely misguided, then I fear we are left with an apparently absurdist image of the world… Our contemporary worldview, which the conspiracy theorist refuses to accept, is one in which nobody — not God, not us, not even some of us — is in control. …
>
> … Conspiracy theories have as virtue the attempt to preserve a human meaning — a rational account — for these sea changes, that allow them to be understood in human terms. If the conspiracy theorists are wrong, then when considered from the human perspective, all we seem to be able to say is that "Shit happens."
>
> Considered in this light, the challenge of conspiracy theory is that it forces us to choose between an almost nihilistic degree of skepticism and absurdism: The conspiracy theorist chooses to embrace the hyper-skepticism inherent in supposed dissimulation on a truly massive scale (by distrusting the claims of our institutions) over the absurdism of an irrational and essentially meaningless world. Until a third option is presented — and perhaps

this is one of the jobs of philosophy — we should expect unwarranted conspiracy theories to continue to enjoy significant popularity.[38]

Spontaneous Orders

Are our only options really conspiracy or coincidence, constructivism or chaos, skepticism or absurdism? Most conspiracy theorists seem to think so, and most analysts of conspiracy theories seem to think so too. As we've seen, the tendency to equate structure and order with purpose and intention is deeply ingrained and quite appealing for a number of reasons. But can structure and order spring from anywhere else? And what would that even mean or look like?

We've so far discussed the various analytic tendencies that help explain the way many conspiracy theorists seem to converge on many similar conspiracy theories. But what kind of explanatory story is "convergence" anyway? Is it simply another manifestation of conspiracy theory? Not at all. There *are* conspiracy theories seeking to explain the popularity of the more unreasonable conspiracy theories, which are put forth by conspiracy theorists who posit a series of "false flag" conspiracy theories designed to hurt the general cause of conspiracy theorizing and turn people against the enterprise altogether. But that is a completely different (and far less reasonable) explanatory story than the one developed above about the various analytic tendencies leading conspiracy theorists to adopt many similar conspiracy theories.

With conspiracy ruled out, it must be coincidence, right? Again, not at all. Conspiracy theorists did not happen to randomly settle upon so many similar conspiracy theories. Rather, the various analytic tendencies discussed above function as causal mechanisms underlying the observed pattern of conspiracy theorists adopting many similar conspiracy theories. Those analytic tendencies are what causally unite the instances of the pattern in question. So neither conspiracy nor coincidence are remotely satisfying explanatory stories here. But there is another term for these convergence-style explanations, which might be able to provide a third option beyond both conspiracy and coincidence: spontaneous order.

The tradition in the social sciences known as "spontaneous order" was famously articulated by philosopher Adam Ferguson as the view that

[38] Keeley, "Of Conspiracy Theories.".

social structures were "the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design."[39] Order without an orderer? Structure without a structurer? These are not exactly intuitive or obvious ideas, and our natural way of making sense of the world doesn't often leave much space for them. But, as it turns out, "spontaneous order" is a deceptively compelling, useful, and pervasive explanatory framework. Consider our earlier example of Joey eating a peanut butter sandwich. Aren't there features of Joey's actions that go far beyond Joey and her "conspiracy" to eat a peanut butter sandwich? After all, Joey and her peanut butter sandwich are not hermetically sealed off in a realm of their own, isolated and detached from the rest of society or the universe, but instead embedded within broader structures both influencing and influenced by Joey's actions.

Joey didn't come up with the idea for peanut butter, for sandwiches, or for peanut butter sandwiches. Joey didn't invent the knife or pioneer the practice of spreading tasty gooey substances across bread slices. Joey didn't grow the peanuts and the wheat, nor did she transform them into peanut butter and bread, nor did she stock the grocery shelves with that peanut butter and bread. Joey also didn't come up with the symbols on the packaging that signified to her that the jar did indeed contain peanut butter and that the plastic bag did indeed contain bread. Joey definitely didn't tell the peanut butter and bread makers to make more peanut butter and bread, even though that's what they'll do and why those foods will continue to line the grocery store shelves once Joey goes back for more.

Likewise, those who came up with the idea for peanut butter, for sandwiches, and for peanut butter sandwiches had no idea who Joey even was and had not the slightest intention of Joey one day walking into her kitchen and making a peanut butter sandwich. The inventors of the knife and pioneers of spreading tasty gooey substances across bread slices didn't have Joey on their minds either. Neither the growers of the peanuts and wheat, nor the chefs who turned them into peanut butter and bread loaves, nor the grocery store employees stocking the shelves ever had Joey in their sights. The people who developed the symbols used to communicate what was in the food packaging never once considered Joey and her peanut butter sandwich. The peanut butter and bread makers never even

[39] Ferguson, Adam. *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 5th ed. (London: T. Cadell 1782).

knew Joey existed, yet they will surely go on making more peanut butter and bread for Joey to purchase and eat.

Once you start to consider the wider contexts of our purposes and intentions, you start to see the limits of explaining events solely by reference to those purposes and intentions. The social world includes purpose, of course, but it also includes the "space between" those purposes, the interactions and interrelationships amongst all the different purposes at play. Orders and structures are often delicate tapestries, formed out of many different, sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting, elements. Human society is crucially reciprocal, with all our plans and projects constantly influencing one another in many different directions and in many different ways. Every action we take ripples outward into a sea of countless other actions, and every action we take is likewise shaped by the ripple effects produced by the actions of others. The result is something so uniquely intricate one can only marvel at its grandeur.[40] Seeing the world in this fresh way helps us in turn see ourselves in a fresh way: not as isolated pawns moved around by some chessmaster, but as part of a bigger, broader, and beautiful web of meanings.

Economist Friedrich Hayek, who's referred to as the "anti-conspiracy theorist" for his emphasis on spontaneous order,[41] stressed the groundbreaking relevance of these kinds of explanations in the sciences.

> The simple conception of an order of the kind which results when somebody puts the parts of an intended whole in their appropriate places applies in many parts of society. Such an order which is achieved by *arranging* the relations between the parts according to a preconceived plan we call in the social field an *organization*. The extent to which the power of many men can be increased by such deliberate co-ordination of their efforts is well-known and many of the achievements of man rest on the use of this technique. It is an order which we all understand because we know how it is made. But it is not the only nor even the chief kind of order on which the working of society rests; nor can the whole of the order of society be produced in this manner.

[40] Roberts, Russ. "A Marvel of Cooperation: How Order Emerges Without a Conscious Planner," (Econlib 2005), https://staging.econlib.net/library/Columns/y2005/Robertsmarvel.html (last visited August 30, 2024).

[41] Moore, Alfred. "Hayek, Conspiracy, and Democracy." *Critical Review* 28.1 (2016): 59.

> The *discovery* that there exist in society orders of another kind which have not been designed by men but have resulted from the action of individuals without their intending to create such an order, is the achievement of social theory — or, rather, it was this discovery which has shown that there was an object for social theory. It shook the deeply-ingrained belief of men that where there was an order there must also have been a personal orderer…
> This kind of order which is characteristic not only of biological organisms (to which the originally much wider meaning of the term organism is now usually confined), is an order which is not made by anybody but which forms itself.
> It is for this reason usually called… "spontaneous"...[42]

The paradigmatic example of spontaneous order has often been the pencil, or more accurately the creation of a pencil, from its beginnings in the procuring of various natural resources on through to its "end" of sitting on your desk, and all the complex production phases in between. You might think something as small, simple, and straightforward as a pencil could be explained purely in terms of human purpose, but not even pencils can be explained without an understanding of spontaneous order, since no *one* knows how to make one. Theorist Leonard Read used the pencil to illuminate the awe-inspiring character of spontaneous order in his famous essay "I, Pencil," a story later popularized in economist Milton Friedman's "Free To Choose" PBS series. When you start to think through every step of this vast and far-reaching process, every ripple across networks of human interaction, it begins to boggle the mind.

> I, Pencil, am a complex combination of miracles: a tree, zinc, copper, graphite, and so on. But to these miracles which manifest themselves in Nature an even more extraordinary miracle has been added: the configuration of creative human energies — millions of tiny know-hows configurating naturally and spontaneously in response to human necessity and desire and in the absence of any human masterminding![43]

When considering larger, more complex phenomena, the role of spontaneous order becomes even clearer and harder to deny. Think about

[42] Hayek, Friedrich. "Kinds of Order in Society." *New Individualist Review* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 1981).

[43] Read, Leonard. *I, Pencil: My Family Tree* (NY: Foundation for Economic Education 1958).

something like human language. No one just sat down one day and invented it. Instead, language gradually emerged from the many, many small choices and interactions amongst language users over time. There simply isn't anything we understand as language outside of the bottom-up practices of the people who use it. Language is also never "done," but instead constantly evolving and adjusting along with the continually changing practice thereof. Attributing language to a conspiracy, to a single mind or to the singular aim of multiple minds acting in conscious concert, is simply nonsensical and has no relation to language as it has actually emerged and as we continue to understand and use it.

Markets are another institution that makes the nature of spontaneous order easier to see. Markets consist of many individuals and groups making their own economic decisions, choosing to allocate their energies and resources where and when they wish. The resulting configuration is a product of those people and their choices all interacting with each other through time, not the product of any single mind or designer. One of the oldest articulations of spontaneous order comes from observing it through market processes and the way individuals are often led to promote ends other than the ones they were consciously pursuing.

> By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest, he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.[44]

Smith's famous "invisible hand" was a metaphor for the nature of spontaneous order, for the way our actions create ripple effects that go far beyond our conscious intention, which are completely remote to us, and which are ultimately of supreme importance in explaining the broader structure and order of society. Invisible hand explanations stand in stark methodological opposition to conspiracy theory, or what philosopher Robert Nozick fittingly called "hidden hand" explanations, which instead

[44] Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* 456.

center intended consequences.[45] Looking at unintended consequences makes clear the explanatory limits of intended consequences. While the latter are easier to see, the former are just as important, if not more, to understanding the social world.

> They [spontaneous orders] comprise practices, rules, institutions, and so forth that have developed not because human actors rationally foresaw their likely benefits and deliberately, consciously constructed them, but rather because they are unintended consequences of various human actors' pursuit of their own purposes and plans.[46]

From language to markets and more, the existence of spontaneous orderSpontaneous order(s) is widely accepted. But there also exist two counter-intuitive or less widely accepted features of spontaneous order-Spontaneous order(s) explanations that are important to understanding both the pervasiveness of the phenomenon itself and the full range and potential of the methodological frameworkMethodological framework(s) it offers. The first is that spontaneous orderSpontaneous order(s) is not inherently beneficent and the unintended consequences involved are not always beneficial. Explanations of spontaneous orderSpontaneous order(s) tend to focus on its positive potential, both because that can be easier to see and because spontaneous orderSpontaneous order(s) is often contrasted against institutionsInstitutions seen to be malevolent. But a more fundamental understanding of spontaneous orderSpontaneous order(s) shows this not to be the case. Theorist Charles Johnson explored the malignant side of spontaneous orderSpontaneous order(s) in the context of rape culture, often mischaracterized as some sort of conspiracyConspiracy amongst men instead of the emergent and decentralized process it is.

> If widely distributed forms of intelligence, knowledge, virtue, or prudence can add up, through many individual self- interested actions, into a benign undesigned order, then there's no reason why widely distributed forms

[45] Nozick, Robert. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. (US: Basic Books 1974) 19.

[46] Horwitz, Steve. "From Smith to Menger to Hayek: Liberalism in the Spontaneous Order Tradition." *The Independent Review* 6.1 (2001): 82.

> of ignorance, prejudice, folly or vice might not add up, through many individual self- interested actions, into an unintended, malign order.[47]

Spontaneous order refers to mechanisms by which human purposes become unintentionally aligned. It doesn't morally evaluate those actions or their resulting alignments. It says nothing one way or the other about which structures are good and which structures are bad. It is merely a methodological tool useful for interpreting and making sense of the world. There may be arguments about which sources of order are preferable in certain contexts or along certain margins, but those debates lie beyond the realm of mere scientific explanation or description. Those who recognize the indispensability of spontaneous order theory ought to especially appreciate its "value-free" character since that's part of what makes it such a powerful framework.

The second counter-intuitive or less widely accepted feature of spontaneous order explanations is that the paradigmatic "non-spontaneous" institutions often contrasted with spontaneous order, such as states, actually contain many elements of spontaneous order. Many people, especially proponents of spontaneous order explanations, often position the idea against states, as if spontaneous order were unnecessary for explaining states, or that states somehow stand outside of spontaneous orders, when nothing could be further from the truth. Without spontaneous order, we cannot sensibly account for either "cooperation among the ruling parties" or "cooperation on the part of the governed" since coordination within each group requires a significant degree of bottom-up participation, acquiescence, and/or ideological buy-in from its members.[48] Proponents of spontaneous order that ignore or underrate the extent to which states are also products of spontaneous order are unfortunately, and ironically, reinforcing the idea that there can exist in society a fundamentally conspiratorial institution, or an institution that exists and operates solely as the product of a single mind or plan rather than many minds and plans interacting to create something greater.

[47] Johnson, Charles. "Women and the Invisible Fist." Paper presented at the Austrian Scholars Conference, Alabama 2011.

[48] Long, Roderick. "Invisible Hands and Incantations: The Mystification of State Power." Paper presented at the Austrian Scholars Conference, Alabama 2011.

Between Convergence and Conspiracy

It is a methodologically disastrous mistake to think of there being spontaneous, or convergent, orders over here and non-spontaneous, or conspiratorial, orders over there, each sealed off from the other and operating according to its own internal logic. Rather, elements of convergence and elements of conspiracy are *always* at play, no phenomena being wholly one or the other. "The crucial choice… is not between a fully emergent and a fully designed order, but between degrees of each."[49] Convergence explanations and conspiracy explanations are not mutually exclusive, but instead form a continuum of potential explanatory stories, with different explanations exhibiting elements of each and lying somewhere between the polarities, sometimes closer to one side and sometimes closer to the other. Convergence and conspiracy are in some sense purely methodological constructs, existing only on the level of theoretical analysis, whereas real events and real institutions always contain features of each.

The simultaneous and necessary existence of both convergence and conspiracy is more obvious when trying to imagine one without the other. Suppose it was convergence all the way down, with conspiracy playing no role in the world, what would it be that's converging? Convergence is an empty and incoherent concept absent anything to converge. The things converging, of course, must be human purposes and intentions, i.e. conspiracies. Without separate conspiracies, there'd be nothing to converge, and convergence would be useless as an explanatory framework. Meanwhile, suppose it was conspiracy all the way down (or up?), with convergence playing no role in the world, what would it be that's being conspired about? Conspiracy is an empty and incoherent concept absent any subject of conspiring. The things conspired about, of course, must be beyond the bounds of the conspiracy, i.e. phenomena ordered not via conspiracy but convergence. Without convergences to conspire about, conspiracy would be useless as an explanatory framework.

Convergence explanations and conspiracy explanations are both indispensable for making sense of the world around us. Every explanation of phenomena will at some point, on some level, or in some dimension make reference to, on the one hand, the way given conspiracies come to converge and, on the other hand, the way given convergences are conspired about. These explanatory frameworks together

[49] Sciabarra, *Marx, Hayek, and Utopia* 47.

form the continuum along which every explanatory story must invariably lie. Convergence and conspiracy are merely two sides of the same methodological coin.

Global Politics

From its humble beginnings in ancient Athenian political scandals all the way up to modern tales of world domination, it is here, in the context of global politics, that conspiracy theory reaches its apex. Global politics are the subject of many of the most popular, most ambitious, most spurious, and most damaging conspiracy theories. From climate change to terrorism to space travel to immigration to security agencies to bioweapons to monetary policy to genocide to developmental aid and beyond, there is scarcely an area of global politics free from the most bizarre conspiracy theories. There is even an ever-expanding list of apparent international cadres that conspiracy theorists see as orchestrating such conspiracies at the highest level, some of them real cadres (the Trilateral Commission, the World Economic Forum, the Bilderberg Meetings, the Mont PelerinSociety), some of them imagined cadres (the New World Order, the Elders of Zion, the Lizard People), and some of them real but not cadres since they're too dispersed, divided, and/or uninfluential (Jews, occultists, communists, homosexuals).

Why are global politics particularly prone to conspiracy theories? The incredible scale of global politics combined with the incredible distance most of us have from such goings-on makes for an explanatory canvas uniquely suited to the conspiracy theorist. The analytic tendencies discussed above are more at home, and harder to rein in, the larger and farther away the phenomenon in question is. First, our overactive pattern-and-agency-recognition gets to enjoy an even wider swath of events onto which to project patterns and agency, while the greater distance makes closer scrutiny more difficult. Second, we can retreat further into "epistemic isolation" and arguments immunized to falsifiability, since we're even more removed from any of the relevant concrete situations and have access to even more candidates to blame for supposedly fabricated counter-evidence. Third, our explanatory stories now have even more space in which to balloon bigger and bigger and more phenomena to incorporate into the conspiracy theory. Fourth, our need for efficacy and intelligibility can run wild with our newfound levels of powerlessness and correspondingly more acute projections of power onto others.

The immense scale of global politics enables conspiracy theorists to project more patterns, impute more agency, immunize more arguments, assimilate more counter-arguments, envelop more events, encompass more institutions, anthropomorphize more phenomena, and exaggerate more explanations. The conspiracy theory escalates further and further, extending out to every major country and every major organization until there is just One Big Conspiracy in which countless individuals are suspected conspirators and the entire rest of the human population is presumed to be at risk. Global politics thus exposes the most pressing and worrying failure modes facing conspiracy theory and conspiracy theorists. This propensity to connect and consolidate many or even all conspiracies until there is One Big Conspiracy helps explain why so many conspiracy theories end up converging on something else: antisemitism.

The history of antisemitism is, in many ways, a history of anti-Jewish conspiracy theories.[50] Antisemitism could itself be understood as a kind of conspiracy theory, one of the oldest, most enduring, and most analytically convenient conspiracy theories. After all, the paradigmatic model of a conspiracy theory, that "there exists exceptionally competent and cunning elites who, while relatively small in number, are disproportionately influential, and who manipulate the rest of us, orchestrate large-scale events, and plot various evils from the shadows," is also the paradigmatic model of Jews according to antisemites. The emergence of One Big Conspiracy all but guarantees conspiracy theorists find their way to antisemitism because even conspiracy theories which do not start from antisemitism wind up there by connecting most or all major world events and then looking around for a group that could plausibly fill the role their theory says must be occupied by someone. There are vanishingly few ways to land on One Big Conspiracy without inevitably coming to see at least the vast majority of Jews as engaged in an intergenerational and international project of self-enriching deception. Antisemitism breeds conspiracy theory and vice versa.

One Big Conspiracy obviously goes way too far to the "conspiracy" end of the convergence-conspiracy continuum to be remotely plausible. Ironically, the extent to which global politics' greater scale invites greater conspiracy theorizing is also the extent to which conspiracy theories lack explanatory power. Conspiracy theorizing is innately limited in providing

[50] Simonson, Kjetil Braut. "Antisemitism and Conspiracism." *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* ed. Michael Butter and Peter Knight (NY: Routledge 2020) 357–70.

the kinds of robust explanatory stories we're looking for in this domain, especially compared to spontaneous order theory, because conspiring faces systematic and severe diseconomies of scale, or inefficiencies and irrationalities emerging from its increasingly unwieldy, intractable, and chaotic process of implementation and execution. From group projects to community meetings to workplace conferences, we've all seen up close and personal the diseconomies of scale facing even relatively small and isolated conspiracies. As conspiracies grow in size, they gain access to more conspirators' talents, but those conspirators also face greater and greater difficulty in actually making use of their talents and coordinating between each other. The flaws famously plaguing central planning, the problem of aligning different incentives and the problem of utilizing dispersed, often tacit knowledge,[51] likewise plague conspiracy. Just as One Big State or One Big Cartel or One Big Firm all face diseconomies of scale so destructive they would require an impossible degree of rational guidance,[52] One Big Conspiracy would too. A more refined use of our social scientific tools tells us not that conspiracies don't happen, but that they are constantly constrained by inherent epistemic limitations and so face an upper limit in their potential size and scope.

Something unique to conspiracies, though, is that they depend not only on coordination amongst all their conspirators, but also on their secrecy. As conspiracies grow in scale, not only does coordination become more difficult, but secrecy becomes more difficult too. Consider the challenges facing just two friends trying to keep a secret between them. Now expand that to dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of people, some of which may be friends, but many more of which are mere acquaintances or even total strangers. As it turns out, coordinating a plan and keeping it secret do not necessarily go hand in hand and it seems as though one often comes at the expense of the other. Political theorist Alfred Moore explained that "Conspiracies require coordination and concealment, but the structures best suited to coordination make it harder to maintain secrecy, while the structures best suited to secrecy make it more difficult to coordinate action."[53] This coordination-concealment tradeoff makes

[51] Lavoie, Don. *National Economic Planning: What is Left?* (MA: Ballinger Publishing Company 1985).

[52] Rothbard, Murray. *Man, Economy, and State* (AL: Mises Institute 2004) 613–4.

[53] Moore, *Hayek, Conspiracy, and Democracy* 45.

for a diseconomy of scale unique to conspiracies, suggesting against the very possibility (or at least the prolonged concealment) of conspiracies beyond a certain scale.

The inverse relationship between a potential conspiracy's scale and the prima facie likelihood of it being true are not lost on all conspiracy theorists, some of whom, such as Rothbard, explicitly resist One Big Conspiracy in favor of multiple, smaller-scale conspiracies interacting with each other and vying for control.

> The bad conspiracy analyst seems to have a compulsion to wrap up all the conspiracies, all the bad guy power blocs, into one giant conspiracy. Instead of seeing that there are several power blocs trying to gain control of government, sometimes in conflict and sometimes in alliance, he has to assume — again without evidence — that a small group of men controls them all, and only seems to send them into conflict.[54]

This outlook seems more methodologically amenable to our convergence-conspiracy continuum, albeit depending on many of the specifics offered by any particular explanatory story. Others place even more emphasis on the convergence side of the explanatory continuum, but seem to arrive at similar conclusions. Theorist G. William Domhoff rejected the idea "that history is one big conspiracy, or even a lot of little ones," rather than "millions of people doing their own thing alone and in groups, within the context of interacting, impersonal variables which no one fully understands, let alone controls," while still retaining the idea of a "power elite," which includes "very rich people and their academic advisers who met together in various interlocking social and policy-forming groups" and who are "more unified, more conscious, and more manipulative" than "any social group with the potential to contradict them."[55] Economist Randall G. Holcombe defended a similar view: "The elite are in the low transaction cost group while the masses are in the high transaction cost group; hence, they are unable to bargain to influence public policy."[56] Comedian "George Carlin" also articulated the idea of a

[54] Rothbard, *Viewpoint: The Conspiracy Theory of History Revisited*.

[55] Domhoff, G. William. The Higher Circles: The Governing Class in America (NY: Vintage 1970) 302.

[56] Holcombe, Randall G. "Political Capitalism" *Cato Journal* 35.1 (2015): 49.

"power elite" in the language of spontaneous orderSpontaneous order(s) theory:

"You don't need a formal conspiracy when interests converge. These people went to the same universities and fraternities. They're on the same board of directors. They're in the same country clubs. They have like interests. They don't need to call a meeting."[57] What these explanatory stories all have in common is that instead of reducing the phenomena they seek to explain to either conspiracy or convergence alone, they invoke both conspiracy and convergence at different levels and in different ways. The social world is treated not as a monolith guided by a single entity, nor as an amalgamation of disparate events, but as a complex and multi-layered series of interactions involving both intended and unintended consequences. Each of these explanatory stories exist along the convergence-conspiracy continuum, though where exactly they lie, or to which end of the continuum they are closer, will depend on the specifics of the explanations and how they are developed both theoretically and empirically. More attempts to make sense of the social world should take cues from these kinds of explanatory stories' clear and refreshing reliance on both conspiracy and convergence. This reliance on both conspiracy and convergence points the way to a more sophisticated and robust social scientific methodology applicable not just to global politics, but to institutional analysis across many domains, including economics, sociology, ethics, and more.

Conspiring for and Against Power

Before we bring our inquiry to a close, it's worth talking a bit about the worries, especially in the sphere of global politics, that underrating conspiracy theory can wind up bolstering various forms of power, especially the power of the state.[58] These worries are not all that unreasonable, especially considering the awfulness of some of the things conspiracy theorists were actually ahead of the curve on. It can be a humbling exercise to

[57] *Politically Incorrect With Bill Maher*. Aired on May 16, 2001, on HBO.

[58] Riggenbach, Jeff. "Hushing Up Conspiracy Theories." *The Libertarian Tradition: Volume 2* (Liberty.me 2016) 21–9.

consider that anyone denying Project MKUltra or COINTELPRO nowadays would be the one on shaky epistemic ground, and likely in need of a conspiracy theory of their own.

It's easy to see why many people believe that "a general skepticism about conspiracy allows people in high places to dodge responsibility for their actions and in some cases to get away with murder."[59] This has certainly been true sometimes, hence the appeal, but has it been true enough? Probably not. Occasional successes can never vindicate an entire approach, especially when that approach is known for making a breathtaking amount of claims and predictions, the vast majority of which turn out to be completely false. Perhaps, "… it is helpful to think of conspiracy theories, not as expressions of dogmatism, but rather as examples of *critical theory gone wrong*,"[60] which are "not just worthless as a guide to action" but "can become a positive impediment to progressive social change."[61]

After all, doesn't the deluge of conspiracy theories purporting to reveal a schemer lurking in every shadow and a man behind every curtain seriously obscure our attempts to identify and explain power? And doesn't this lead people who would otherwise resist power to instead bolster power? This tends to happen in two ways. The first is by repelling potential power-resistors away from various causes by tainting those causes with the stink of conspiracy theory. If anti-war activists articulate or defend anti-war views using the language of conspiracy theory and succumb to the four analytic tendencies discussed above, then those who are (not wrongly) skeptical of conspiracy theory will be more likely to underrate or totally dismiss the anti-war activists and their views. Even worse, if enough people who go around opposing war also go around e.g. opposing Jews, it starts to look to others like those views are importantly linked. It's not that others are free from any epistemic responsibility to dig deeper into the views in question, and to ultimately discover where conspiracy theories end and more robust anti-war views begin, but that misguided and/or hateful activists don't make that parsing any easier for those they're trying to persuade.

[59] Pigden, Charles. "Popper Revisited, or What Is Wrong With Conspiracy Theories?" *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 25.1 (1995): 27.

[60] Heath, "When does Critical Theory Become Conspiracy Theory?" 18.

[61] Heath, "When does Critical Theory Become Conspiracy Theory?" 37.

This brings us to the second way conspiracy theory can lead people who would otherwise resist power to instead bolster power, which is by distorting the views of those already trying to resist power. Consider how the more eye-grabbing, exciting, and existentially satisfying explanatory stories fit better on protest signs than the more complex, nuanced, multi-dimensional explanatory stories. Conspiracy theories, while repellant to many, are also very useful for building movements, forming rallies, and inspiring others to action, especially if their more overt conspiratorial nature is made clear amongst only the most hardcore and dedicated activists. But praxis is inseparable from analysis, and praxis guided by bad analysis is, at best, useless and, at worst, counter-productive.

Some activists sincerely think they're opposing war when they're opposing Jews because their conspiratorial analysis tells them Jews are to blame for war. In trying to resist power, these activists have become practitioners of power. Without some serious methodological reflection and change, it's not long before these activists' primary object of opposition is no longer war, but Jews, and they are no longer anti-war, but antisemitic. The classic socialist refrain that "antisemitism is the socialism of fools" speaks to the broader way resistance to power initially rooted in institutional analysis (socialist or otherwise) can become defanged and ultimately displaced by simpler, pithier conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are a powerful weapon in the arsenal of power. This is why philosopher Leo Strauss argued Joseph Stalin deliberately cultivated antisemitism.

> The fact that anti-Semitism is the socialism of fools is an argument not against, but for anti-Semitism; given the fact that there is such an abundance of fools, why should one not steal that very profitable thunder.[62]

Here we arrive at the most pressing worry regarding the intersection of power and conspiracy. It turns out conspiracy theories have themselves "allowed people in high places to dodge responsibility for their actions and in some cases get away with murder." Look at the conspiracies of "International Jewry" motivating many of the atrocities perpetrated by Nazis. Or the entire history of antisemitic conspiracy theories being used

[62] Strauss, Leo. "Why We Remain Jews: Can Jewish Faith and History Still Speak to Us?" *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought* ed. Kenneth Hart Green (NY: SUNY Press 1997): 316–7.

as a pretext to take away the rights of Jews. Or conspiracies of "communist infiltration" licensing the expansion of the surveillance state and the crackdown on freedom of speech in the mid-century United States. Or the way "Great Replacement" conspiracy theories reinforce the contemporary United States government's brutal treatment of immigrants. Or the role of "Cultural Marxist" conspiracy theories in rampant homophobia and transphobia. There's unfortunately no shortage of conspiracy theories which have helped bolster power, so perhaps a general (though not totalizing) skepticism about conspiracy theory is exactly what's called for.

Moreover, conspiracy theory lends itself to more authoritarian conceptions of social order and social change, because it views order as inherently authorial and transforms questions about different institutional arrangements into questions about who should have control over given institutions. The more blame we place on whomever happens to be in charge of institutions, rather than any underlying institutional logic or incentive structures, the more we take the institutions for granted. This can lead to, first, misdiagnosing social ills as merely the products of the powers that be, rather than anything inherent in power itself, and, second, misplacing our hopes for progress in specific individuals, rather than any sort of structural change. Appreciating the limits of conspiracy theory, and the role of spontaneous order, or order without any author(ity), helps people do the vital work of "confront[ing] not just the individuals involved but the power structures themselves."[63]

Conclusion

Conspiracy theory is a social scientific methodological framework that seeks to explain phenomena in terms of human purposes and intentions. It doesn't refer to a specific set of beliefs, let alone "fringe" beliefs, but instead a way of making sense of the world. Untempered by alternative methodological frameworks, conspiracy theory can suffer from four analytic tendencies: overactive pattern-and-agency-recognition, epistemic isolation, self-undermining totalizingness, and constructivism. Another social scientific methodological framework is spontaneous order, which

[63] Glitterbomb, Logan Marie. "Protocols of the Elders of Zion, QAnon, and the Cult of Statism," (Center for a Stateless Society 2020), https://c4ss.org/content/53606 (last visited August 30, 2024).

seeks to explain phenomena in terms of convergent plans and unintended consequences. Together, conspiracy theory and spontaneous order form a convergence-conspiracy continuum along which every explanatory story lies. This more robust methodological framework helps us avoid the failure modes of conspiracy theory, especially in regards to global politics and power, and consequently can both make better sense of the world around us and help us improve that world.

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